

August 26, 2009 - Hunger Garden Founder from Hempfield Honored

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Hunger Garden founder from Hempfield honored

By Mary Pickels

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More than a dozen years ago, Hempfield resident Richard Shaver was living the good life. The president and CEO of Penn State Tool & Die, he belonged to country clubs and he flew his own plane.

He
felt the need to give back.

Shaver established the Hunger Garden on his family's property near New Stanton. Between 2001 and 2008, the garden yielded more than 150,000 pounds of produce, all donated to the Westmoreland County Food Bank and distributed to the needy through its Operation Fresh Express program.

Last year's donation exceeded 26,000 pounds of corn, cucumbers, cabbage, zucchini and peppers.

On Tuesday, his efforts were acknowledged by U.S. Rep. John Murtha, who presented Shaver with an award for his Hunger Garden.

"It's easy for me to dump money in a pot at church," Shaver said yesterday.

His daughter, Virginia Knor, who works for the Salvation Army, suggested her father might enjoy doing something more hands-on.

"When he came up with the idea of helping, it sounded like a good idea to me," said his wife, Joan Shaver.

"Dick is one in a million," food bank CEO Marlene Kozak said.

She noted that Shaver, 69, provides seed, fertilizer, an irrigation system and farm equipment, along with his own labor on the garden's 20 acres.

"We are eternally grateful," Kozak said.

Murtha said Shaver struggles with a response when asked why he started the garden.

"He had a big heart, and he wanted to help people," Murtha said. "That's why he did it."

Reading from his tribute in the Congressional Record, dated Feb. 12, Murtha said, "Madam Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to an individual who has generously donated his land, his money, and his time to feeding thousands of needy individuals and families in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.

"Mr. Shaver served his country in the U.S. Army, built a successful career, and at a time when he could sit back and enjoy the fruits of his labor, he set out to help those in need.

"Madam Speaker, in a struggling economy where millions of American have lost their jobs and are struggling to make ends meet, it gives me great pleasure to honor people like Mr. Shaver and the volunteers of the 'Hunger Garden.' Their extraordinary work and generosity has a tremendous impact on the lives of many, and are an inspiration to us all," he read.

"I was shocked," Shaver said. "I wasn't looking for any rewards or recognition."

He credited Lyn Hunter of Penn Township with recruiting most of the nearly 600 volunteers who pluck and pack the produce Monday evenings for delivery to the food bank.

Hunter had helped pick produce in the garden when she approached Shaver five years ago, offering to find more volunteers.

When she made the offer, "he ordered 3,000 plants and doubled the size of the garden," Hunter said.

She contacted local churches, where she found many willing hands. Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, individuals and families also volunteer.

Shaver said the garden would not be possible without the efforts of food bank staff and the volunteers who seed, plant and harvest.

"I want to thank them," Shaver said. "The garden would be nothing but weeds if I didn't have them."

Sometimes food bank recipients who get back on their feet volunteer in the Hunger Garden, he said.

"It gives them a sense of belonging," Shaver said, "and paying back."